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מחבר ספרי שו"ת דרך המלך, אמרי מרדכי, ודרכי המלך על המועדים ועוד
רשת מעונות, ורשת גנים, ת"ת פרי תואר, ובית יעקב פרי תואר, תיכון בית יעקב החדש, ת"ת מאור ישראל,
ישיבה קטנה ארחות יהודה, ביהמ"ד גבוה לרבנים ודיינים "לקח טוב" קופת "מפעל החסד" אלעד
Chief Rabbi of Elad, Israel MORDECHAI MALKA, Founder & President of Institutions "Or Hamelech"



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Parashat Vayeira

Do Not Go Beyond the Letter of the Law at Your Friend's Expense

In our *parashah*, Avraham Avinu says to the *malachim* (18:4), "Please let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline under the tree."

Questions:

- 1- It states in *Masechet Bava Batra* (86b), "Said R' Yehudah in the name of Rav: Everything that Avraham did by himself, Hashem did by Himself. And what he [- Avraham] did through a messenger, [- Hashem] gave to them through a messenger. Therefore since the intention of "Please let some water be brought" was through a messenger, so too, did the Jewish Nation merit water through Moshe, who hit the rock. On the other hand, when the *pasuk* states, "And he stood," or "to the cattle ran Avraham," so too, did Hashem Himself give their reward by establishing clouds of glory and bringing them down the quail." This is seemingly difficult: Avraham offered the *malachim* only a small amount of water – why was the reward of the Jewish people not diminished in size as well? Why did they receive an abundance of water; they apparently should have only received a small amount as well?
- 2- I furthermore saw in the *sefer Yated Shem* quoting from the *Nachal Eliyahu*, that he asks why Avraham only gave them a small amount of water. Why did he not give them a large amount like they needed?
- 3- The question is magnified when we consider the fact that Avraham slaughtered three calves to serve his guests three tongues. He spared no expense to honor them when it came to the meat. Yet when it came to the water, he only gave them a small amount. What is the explanation for this?

Many Individuals Err

We will begin by saying that there are many individuals who err in their path of Divine service. They think that to be particular, scrupulous, and stringent regarding the fulfillment of mitzvot is the most important part of Judaism. Yet they do not examine, clarify, and think whether their stringencies are adversely affecting their surroundings, family members, and employees, for example. Since they consider stringent adherence to the mitzvot to be supremely important, many times they damage or disturb their fellow men with their actions. Yet they think that their fellow men are also bound to their way of thinking, and they therefore do not have to consider their fellow men. On the contrary – their fellow men must be considerate of them. This is a great mistake in *avodat Hashem*, for the ends does not justify the means. Quite the opposite, this is a *mitzvah ha'ba me'aveirah*, a mitzvah that is performed by committing a sin. Our Sages have stated that "*Derech eretz kadmah leTorah*, Refined conduct precedes the Torah." Therefore, prior to fulfilling the Torah and mitzvot, one must contemplate whether his action is not at the expense of the mitzvot between man and his fellow. The only path for fulfilling Torah and mitzvot is one that is free of any trace of transgressing the mitzvot between man and his fellow. Only then is it possible to fulfill the Torah and mitzvot. For if the means towards performing Torah and mitzvot are not proper and in line with the Torah perspective, it is a mitzvah performed by committing a sin, and the reward for such a mitzvah is lost.

One Should Not be Scrupulous in Mitzvah Performance if it is at the Expense of Another

Now we can answer the questions posed above: It's true that Avraham was willing to provide his guests with everything in great measure. However, that is only when the service was being performed by him. However, here a messenger was bringing the water. He therefore could not demand him to exert much effort, for it would constitute going beyond the letter of the law at the expense of his fellow man.

A Trait Exemplified by R' Yisrael Salanter

We will relate stories about *Gedolei Yisrael* that illustrate just how much they were stringent when it came to mitzvot regarding man and his fellow. This was even the case when it came at the expense of being scrupulous with a mitzvah that they were performing. Such was the case with R' Yisrael Salanter as well. One time when R'



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Yisrael was living in Kovno, he was seen washing his hands before the meal with a small amount of water – even though there was a pail full of water standing before him. When they sat down to eat, R' Yisrael was asked why he sufficed with such a small amount of water for *netilat yadaim*. For our Sages state in *Masechet Shabbat* (62b) that R' Chisda attributed his abundant blessings to the fact that he washed his hands with a large amount of water. R' Yisrael answered that he saw the housekeeper bring the water from a far distance and that she was practically collapsing beneath the heavy weight of the water. He remarked that it is forbidden for an individual to exceed the letter of law if it is at the expense of someone else's shoulders.

Forgoing All of the Mizmorim and Divrei Torah at the Shabbat Meal

R' Yisrael Salanter had a disciple who constantly requested that R' Yisrael be his guest for Shabbat. Yet R' Yisrael always refused. The disciple described to his rebbe the way he conducted himself at the Shabbat table. He would recite prayers, sing songs of praise, and speak words of Torah. Everything was carried out with the greatest level of exactitude, and the mitzvah was beautified to the greatest extent. Why, then, did R' Yisrael refuse to be his guest? Finally, R' Yisrael acquiesced, but he made a condition with his student, stipulating that he would head the Shabbat table. Understandably, the student happily agreed. When they returned from the *beit haknesset*, R' Yisrael requested to immediately make *kiddush* and skip over all of the Shabbat liturgy that preceded it. His student was incredulous, but he could not protest his rebbe's decision. They then washed their hands and immediately ate. R' Yisrael ate quickly and immediately requested the second course and dessert. Then he asked for *mayim achronim* and recited *bircat hamazon*. Understandably, the student was surprised – is this the way the Shabbat meal is supposed to be? No prayers, *zemirot*, or words of Torah? However, R' Yisrael, instead of explaining himself, called in the housekeeper, who came to the table. He asked her forgiveness for causing her any inconvenience by rushing the meal. After all, she had no time to pause and was constantly serving and clearing off the table. However, she thanked the *rav* for the very great kindness that he had performed for her that Shabbat. She wished it could be like that every Shabbat. She explained that she was a widow and desperately needed a livelihood, to the extent that she was forced to work on Shabbat. Each Shabbat, the meal took a very long time, ending close to midnight. Only after they would finish, could she return home to make *kiddush* for her children. Since at that time it was already very late, the children would doze off, lacking any desire to eat the Shabbat meal. Sometimes she even had to eat alone. Each Shabbat she suffered anew. However, *baruch Hashem*, this Shabbat, since they finished early, she could joyously eat together with her children, as is befitting a Shabbat meal. "Now you understand why I hurried the meal," explained R' Yisrael. "It is a mitzvah performed by committing a transgression to be exceedingly scrupulous, and recite lengthy *tefillot* and *zemirot* at the expense of others. On the contrary, the greatest beautification of a mitzvah is when an individual beautifies mitzvot *bein adam le'chavero*. Then he can afterwards be exceedingly scrupulous with prayers, song, and *divrei Torah*. This we learn from the incident with Avraham Avinu. Even though he gave everything else with a great abundance, but when it came to water, he gave only a little. Since it was brought by his servant, he only gave the amount that was absolutely necessary, and he would not go beyond the letter of the law at someone else's expense. How careful must an individual be not to burden his friend. Many times it is the exact opposite, with himself he is willing to forgo acting scrupulously, but when someone else is involved, then he has demands and specifications. However, the path of the Torah is not so; rather, he must consider his friend and honor him. On the contrary, his own honor he can forgo, but not the honor of his friend."

R' Yisrael and the Matzah Baking

It is furthermore told about the custom of R' Yisrael Salanter, who was part of a special matzah baking group. They baked the matzot with all of the stringencies possible. R' Yisrael therefore personally stood by and watched to make sure that everything was being done in the most perfect way possible. One time, he took ill, however and was unable to participate. The members of the group approached him to receive his guidance on how to bake the matzot. He responded by saying that the main thing, the most important stringency, is to take heed not to



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distress, and to be very careful, with the honor of the woman who kneaded the matzot. They should not scream at her, nor distress or cause pain in any way, for she is an unfortunate widow.

Shortening a Prayer So as Not to Slight the Local Rav

There was a period of time that the Chafetz Chayim resided in the city Moloditza. He prayed in the large *beit haknesset* there, together with the *rav* of the city. Despite the fact that it was the Chafetz Chayim's custom to regularly lengthen his prayers, during that period, however, he shortened them. He always tried to finish his prayers before the *rav*. He did not want the congregation to wait for him, but rather for the *rav*. He wanted to prevent the *rav* from feeling bad.

Forgoing Shaking the *Lulav*

When the Chafetz Chayim lived in the city of Snovsak in the period of the First World War, there was terrible shortage of *lulavim* and *etrogim*. With great difficulty, they barely managed to obtain one *lulav* and *etrog*, and they brought it to the Chafetz Chayim. Even though the Chafetz Chayim held the four species to fulfill the mitzvah, he absolutely refused to take them to shake during *Hallel*. When they asked him why he did so, he answered that while the entire congregation could also fulfill their requirement to make a blessing over the species, only *he* would be able to shake them for *Hallel*. By doing so, this would cause anguish to the other members of the congregation. It was therefore better to forgo shaking the *lulav*, for that is only a custom, even though it is an ancient and holy custom. But being careful not to cause others pain involves several positive and negative Torah commandments.

Words of Mussar

You have now learned the proper path of Torah and mitzvot, and that the ends does not justify the means. On the contrary, if there is even the slightest harm caused to one's fellow due to his fulfillment of the Torah and mitzvot, it is preferable to forgo the mitzvah, because it is being performed through a transgression. Therefore, man is required to contemplate before doing each mitzvah if he is causing any harm to his surroundings. Only when he has taken everything into consideration and verified that his actions are free of violating the mitzvot between man and his fellow, can he fulfill the Torah and mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom
Rav Mordechai Malka